

**AGE**  
*Concern*



How Ageist  
is Britain?

## Foreword

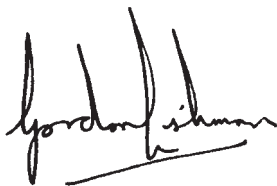
How ageist is Britain? Extremely, fairly, or not at all?

When we commissioned the first comprehensive study of ageism in 2004, we were keen to find the answers to questions such as: what is 'old'; how age related stereotypes affect our attitudes to older people and ageing and how serious people feel the problem to be.

What was clear from the findings is that ageism definitely exists, and is experienced by people of all ages. In fact, it is the most prevalent form of discrimination today, with 29% of people reporting it, more than any other form of discrimination. People believe that ageism will get worse over time with the demographic shift in society.

There is recognition of ageism amongst the public, however. Nearly half thought that age discrimination was fairly or very serious. This confirms previous Age Concern research which shows strong support for tough action on ageism, with 93% of those polled calling for people to have a legal right to carry on working beyond the age of 65.

We have demonstrated that ageism is pervasive, but measurable and we suggest ways in which The Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) can and should work to overcome ageism. This research is important for those involved in creating a new equality commission, tasked with combating discrimination on six grounds (race, disability, gender, religion & belief, sexual orientation and age). It illustrates the complexities of prejudice; the prevalence and seriousness of ageism and fears that it is on the increase. The CEHR will need to serve the 20 million strong older population but equally reach out to the many younger people who are victims of age prejudice. And understanding ageism will be vital in order to serve citizens who have suffered age discrimination in addition to other forms of prejudice. More widely, as we deepen our knowledge of attitudes to age and ageing we can be more effective in rooting out the ageist barriers that are routinely placed in older people's lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Lishman', with a horizontal line underneath.

**Gordon Lishman OBE**

Director General  
Age Concern England

## Introduction

A recent advertisement for the betting shop “PaddyPower” shows two women crossing the road. Odds are placed near their heads as to the likelihood of the approaching car running them over. The two women are older and walking slowly across the road to the frustration of the impatient driver. Can you imagine the same advertisement however if it was laying odds on running over the women because they were black, or gay, or Muslim, or severely disabled? Society has fought hard over the past three decades to ensure equality for all and to make clear that discrimination on grounds of race, gender, sexuality, religion or disability is unacceptable.

Isn't it time that ageism was taken just as seriously?

## Defining our lives by age

Our lives are defined by ageing: the ages at which we can learn to drive, vote, have sex, buy a house or retire, get a pension, travel by bus for free. More subtle are the implicit boundaries that curtail our lives: the “safe” age to have children, the “experience” needed to fill the boss's role, the physical strength needed for some jobs. Society is continually making judgements about when you are old enough for something – and when you are too old. But if we allow ageism to flourish unchallenged it means that “too old” can lead to discrimination. For example:

- Why are women over 70 not invited for breast cancer screenings?
- Why are magistrates or jurors not allowed to serve past the age of 70?
- Why are people over 65 who find it difficult to get around not eligible for help with travel – while those who are disabled but below 65 are?
- Why are nearly a third of people between 50 and state pension age without paid work?

Replace age with gender, race, sexuality or any of the other prejudices named above and see if these prejudices and discrimination would be acceptable.

## Background

Ageism is under-researched compared with other types of prejudice and there has been no previous systematic national survey of age-related prejudice.

So, Age Concern developed a comprehensive research programme, in partnership with the University of Kent<sup>1</sup>, during the summer and autumn of 2004. Age Concern Research Services commissioned TNS to conduct a nationally representative sample survey among those aged 16 and over across Great Britain. Detailed interviews were conducted with 1843 people with questions developed through a mixture of thorough literature review and evaluation, workshop development, qualitative testing and quantitative validation. The result was a major research and survey programme exploring the nature and prevalence of prejudice and discrimination about age and ageing.

We looked at scientifically robust examples of prejudice. Given that few people would be likely to openly admit to being ageist, we analysed more subtle aspects of stereotypes and attitudes to gauge the nature and extent of ageism.

## Main findings<sup>2</sup>

- More people (29%) reported suffering age discrimination than any other form
- From age 55 onwards people were nearly twice as likely to have experienced age prejudice than as any other form of discrimination
- Nearly 30% of people believed there is more prejudice against the old than five years ago, and that this will continue to get worse
- One third of people thought that the demographic shift towards an older society would make life worse in terms of standards of living, security, health, jobs and education
- One in three respondents say the over 70s are viewed as incompetent and incapable



PaddyPower advertisement (2004)

<sup>1</sup> Age Concern England is indebted to Professor Dominic Abrams and his team at the Centre for Study of Group Processes for their significant contributions.

<sup>2</sup> All figures throughout this report are drawn from the Age Concern Research Services/University of Kent research report for Age Concern England January 2005 unless otherwise stated.

## Discussion on the findings:

### 1. Ageism: how old is too old?

“To me old age is always fifteen years older than I am.”

(Bernard M Baruch)

We all disagree on when youth ends and old age begins. Our opinions are formed by our gender (women judge youth ends more than five years later than men on average), our experience and of course how old we are when asked the question (a 25 year-old will give a very different answer to what old age is than a 55 year-old).

But just because there is no magical date when one becomes officially old, it does not mean there is no such thing as age prejudice.

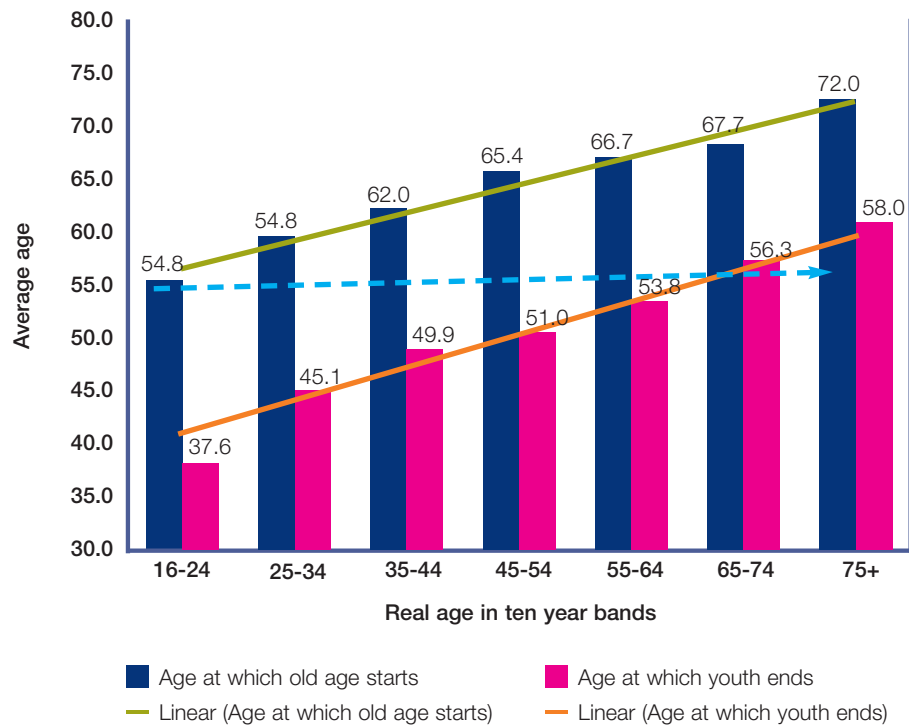
For one in three, old age starts at 70, or later, but the average is 65 (no doubt reflecting the state pension age of 65). “Being young” on average, ends at 49 according to the survey group although, one in four incurable optimists say that youth “never ends” – particularly younger women and those with children.

This narrow window of around 15 years between youth and age suggests people are prone to classify people as either young or old and use these categories for judging people. When asked to classify their age on a continuum people are relatively objective. They see themselves as young up to about the age of 30 and see themselves as old from around the age of 70.

For the sake of clarity in the research ‘old’ was classified as over 70 and ‘young’ as under 30.

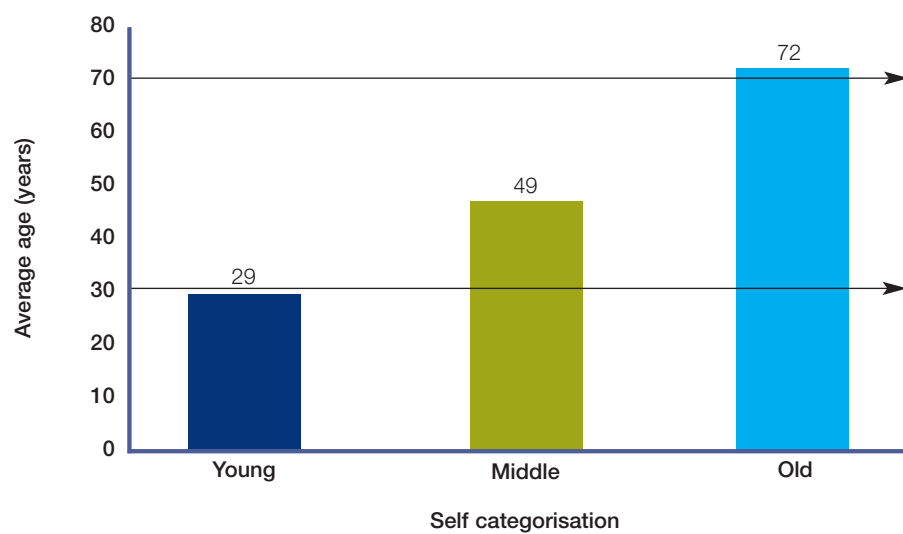
## What is the meaning of 'old'?

When do people think old age starts and youth ends?



## How do people describe their own age?

Which age group do people think they belong to?



## 2. Ageism: Grey Panthers – or “Dodderly but Dear”?

Victor Meldrew in *One Foot in the Grave*. Compo in *Last of the Summer Wine*. Steptoe in *Steptoe and Son*. There are constant age related stereotypes around us.

But what effect does this have on our perception of older people?

Social and psychological research suggests that groups in society tend to be stereotyped by looking at two primary qualities: how competent/able they are and how warm/likeable they are.

The first quality relates to what status the group has in society; the second tends to be linked to whether people see the group as competing with them or representing a threat to them.

When similar research was carried out in the United States old people were characterised as “dodderly but dear” – i.e. lacking in competence but friendly and warm<sup>1</sup>.

People will not admit to being prejudiced, so asking about stereotypes provides an alternative, less direct measure of people’s views about older people.

In our research, the respondents were asked to rate the friendliness and the capability of people over 70 and under 30 using a scale of 1-5 where 1 was ‘not at all’ and 5 was ‘very’.

Only one in ten people thought the over 70s were unfriendly while one in three thought the old were incompetent and incapable.

And when given a list of more subtle character traits, older people were classified as moral, intelligent and admirable. However they were also seen as pitiable and rarely as enviable.

These results make a striking comparison with attitudes towards the under 30s. Younger people were seen as more enviable, more capable, more intelligent. Older people scored highly only on being seen as moral, friendly, pitiable and admirable.

These differences in perception reveal a prevailing patronising view of older people as likeable in the context of pity and sympathy rather than being respected.

But it is equally important to point out that this stereotyping does the under 30s few favours either. They are seen as less moral, less friendly and less admirable than their older counterparts.

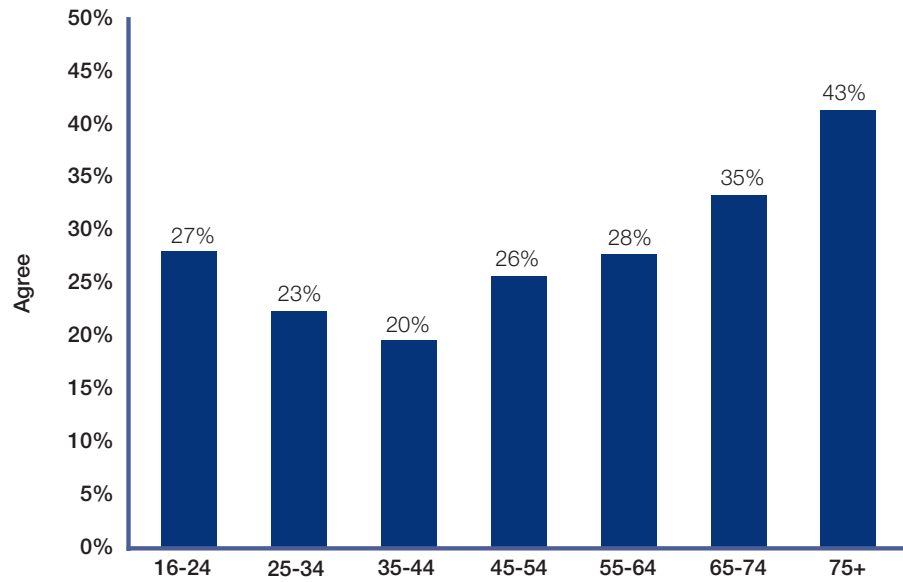
And while the research indicates they are seen as more enviable and capable, this does not always translate into positive expectations. For example, while 70% of people felt they would be comfortable with a suitably qualified boss over 70, only 58% felt they would be comfortable with a boss under 30.

<sup>1</sup> Nelson T (ed) (2002). *Ageism: stereotyping and prejudice against older persons*. MIT Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts



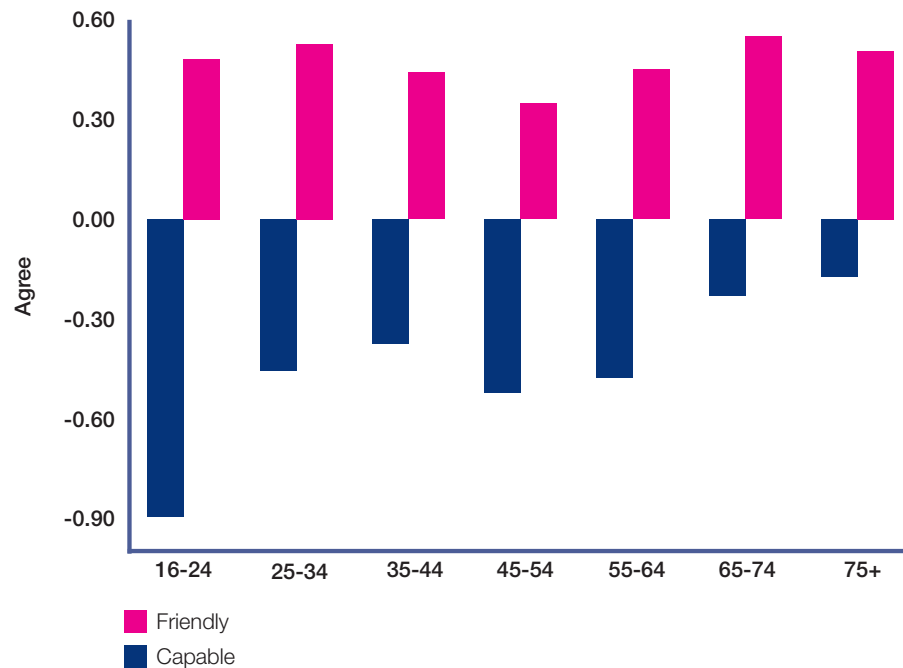
### Self-Stereotyping:

Agreement with the statement 'As people get older they become less competent'.



### Older people are dodderly...(but dear):

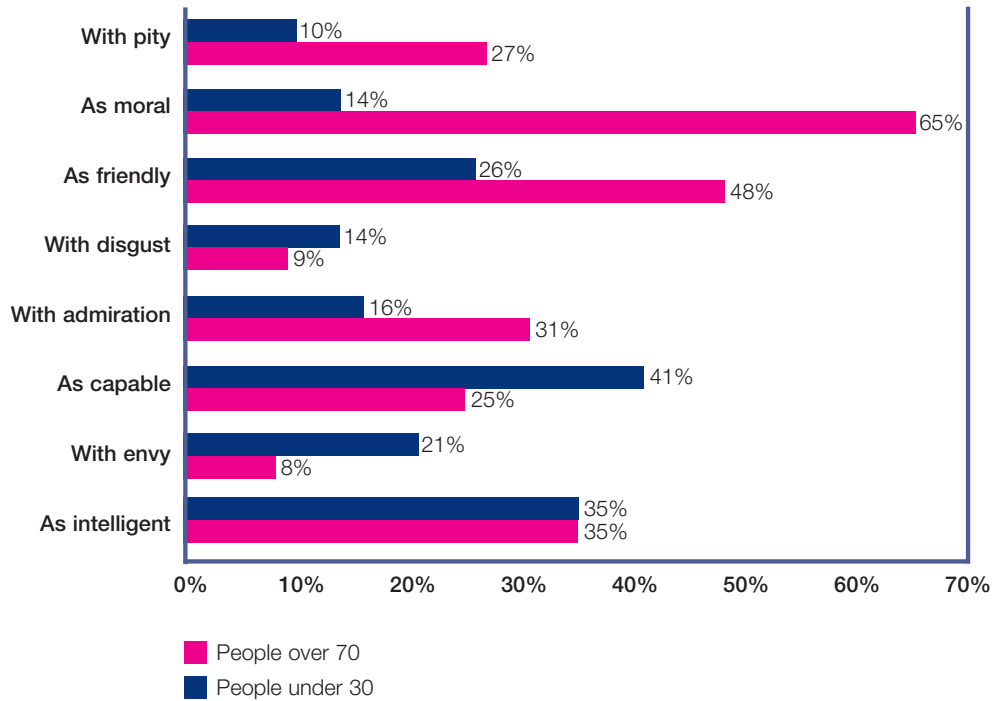
Average perceived difference in stereotypes of younger and older people's friendliness and capability





## How are older people perceived in comparison with younger people?

Perceived stereotypes of older and younger people



### 3. Ageism: how we perceive an ageing society

By 2041, more than 20 million people will be over 60 – or 37% of the population. The trend towards an ageing population is accelerating and will change society.

Today most people don't think of themselves as ageist. In a recent poll commissioned by Age Concern, 93% said people should have a legal right to carry on working past the age of 65, nearly 75% thought that fixed retirement ages were old fashioned and unnecessary and just under a third thought that as people get older they become less competent<sup>1</sup>.

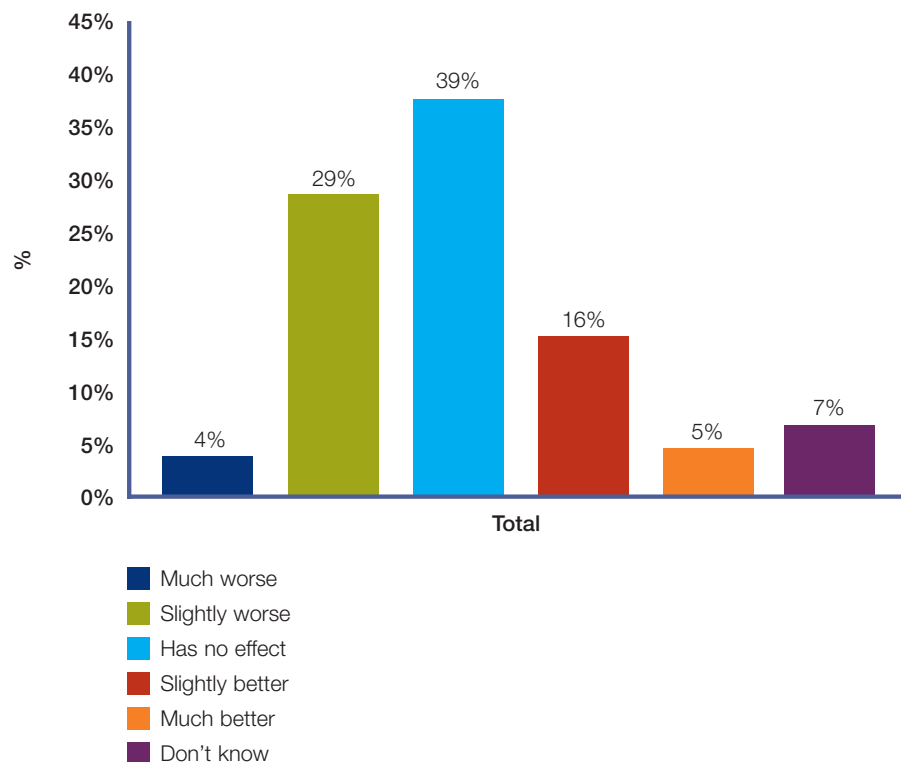
But our research, which looked at people's perceptions, found that nearly half of people think that employers don't like having older people on the workforce as it "spoils their image". And one third of people agreed that the ageing trend would make society worse in regards to security, standards of living, health, access to jobs and education. What is particularly worrying is that there is a strong class-based element to this prejudice. The higher the social class the more negatively the effect of having more older people in society is perceived.

Just under half of all ABs believe the growth in the number of old people will make society worse and less than a fifth believe it will improve it. Social class DE has a more balanced view with 22% thinking it will make it better and 22% thinking it would make it worse.

Nearly one in ten people thought that attempts to give equal employment opportunities to people over 70 had gone too far. 41% believed that they had not gone far enough.

#### Effect of more people over 70 on life for all of us

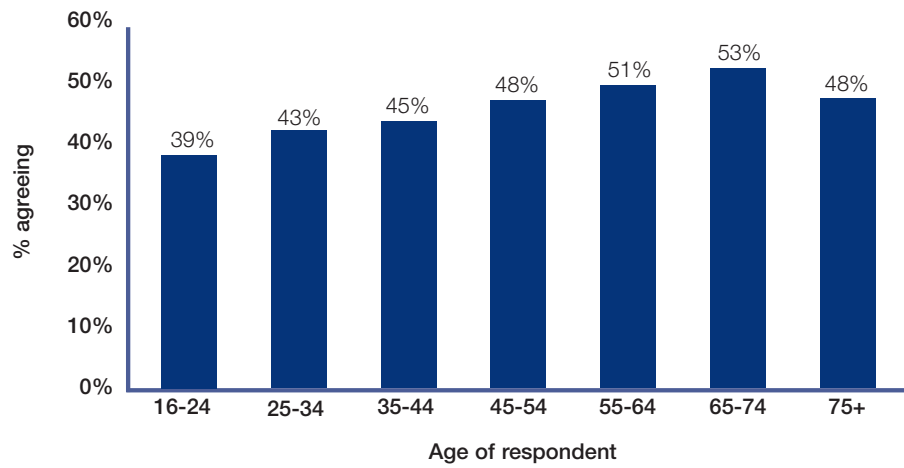
Effects on general issues in society such as safety and security, standards of living, health, access to jobs and education, etc.



<sup>1</sup> Five questions were placed on ICM's Omnibus Survey over the weekend of 16-18th July 2004

### Age in employment

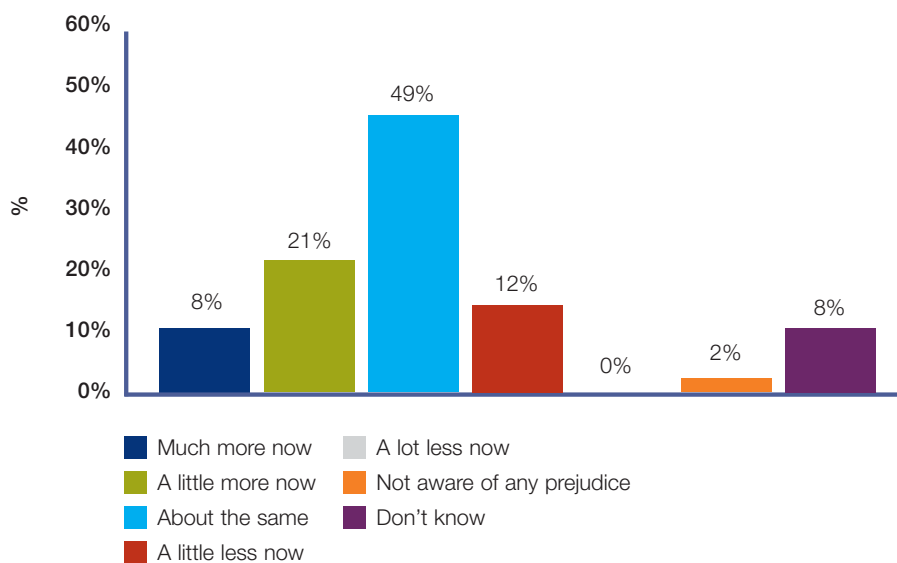
Agreement with the statement 'Employers don't like having older people on their workforce as it spoils their image'



#### 4. Ageism: getting worse all the time

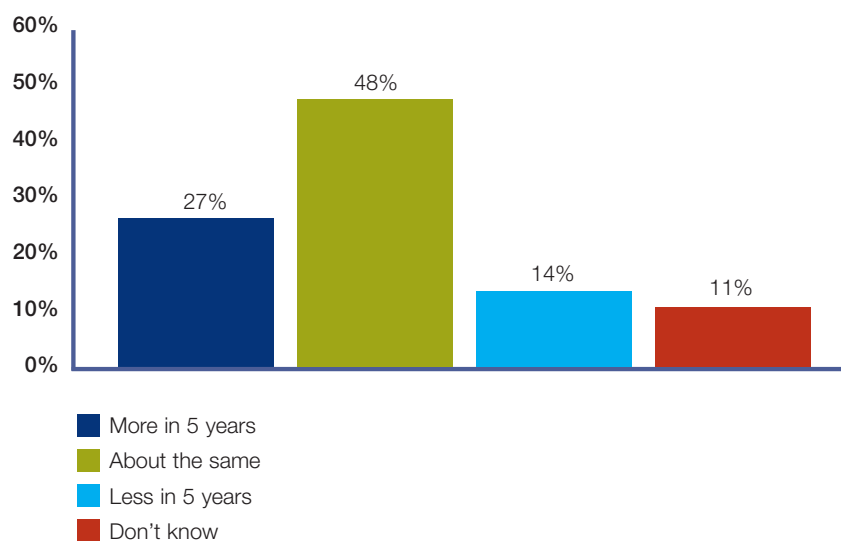
People think prejudice is increasing against the old. Nearly 30% of people believe there is more prejudice than there was five years ago, and 27% think there will be even more prejudice in another five years time. Given the inexorable increase in the numbers and proportions of older people in the population this is a worrying scenario and calls out for urgent action.

##### Level of prejudice now – compared to 5 years ago



##### What about the future?

Will there be more, less or the same amount of prejudice against people over 70 in 5 years' time?



## 5. Ageism: how is it affected by getting to know others better?

Do our attitudes change if we have closer contact with those from another age group? The answer is dramatic.

Our survey asked people how much they thought under 30s and over 70s had in common. Approximately one third of those questioned thought they had a lot or a great deal in common.

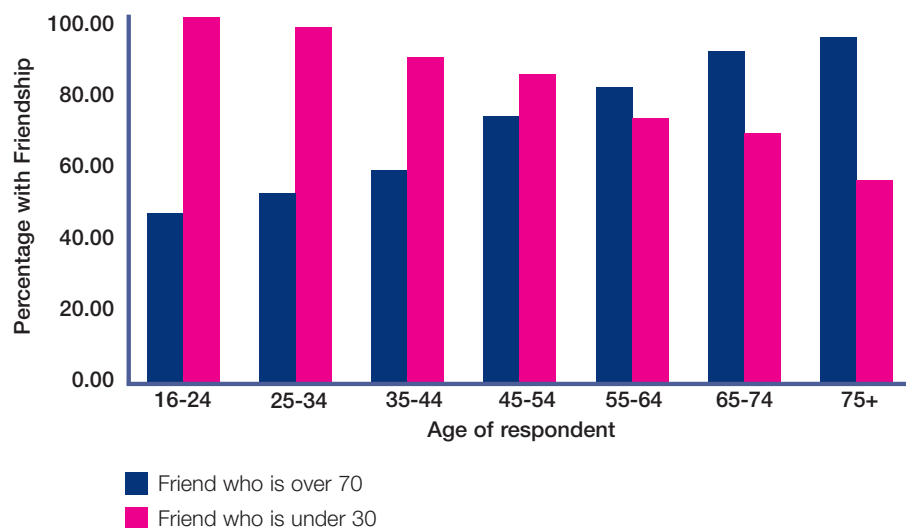
But this overview masked hugely important variations. Among the under 35s, more than a third of those who had close contact with the over 70s thought they had a lot in common. But that dropped to just over a fifth when people who had little to do with the older generation were questioned.

Among the over 65s the contrast was even more startling. There, 42% of those in close contact felt they had a lot in common with younger people compared with only one in six (18%) who did not.

Research suggests that positive contact, eg friendships, between people of different groups can lay the ground for better relations and reduce stereotyping and prejudice<sup>1</sup>. Encouraging more intergenerational, positive contact may be a key way of tackling ageism against people of any age.

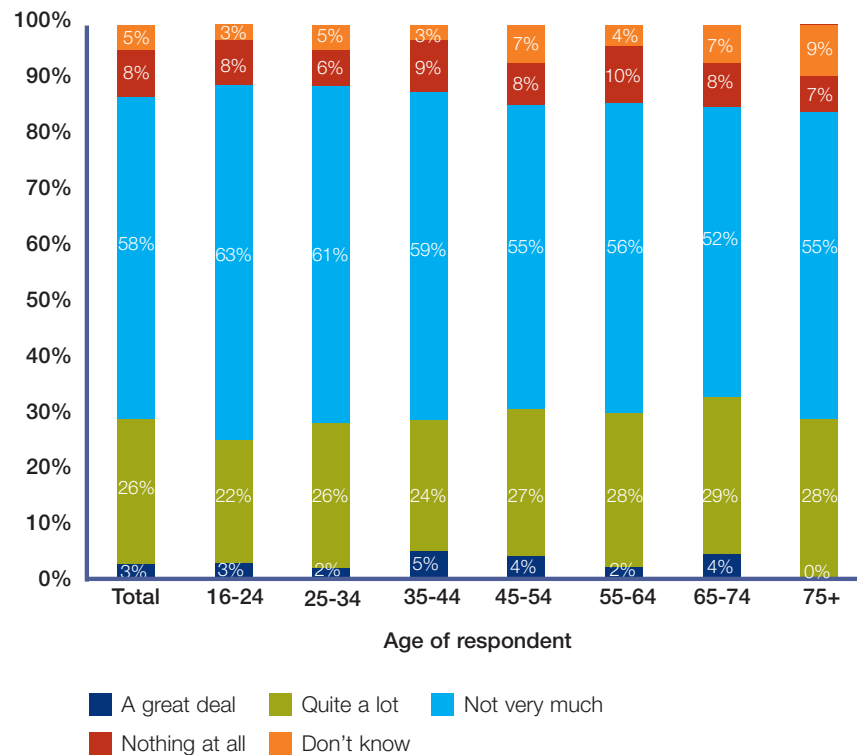
### Intergenerational contact

Percentage with friends or close intergenerational relationships with someone over 70 or under 30



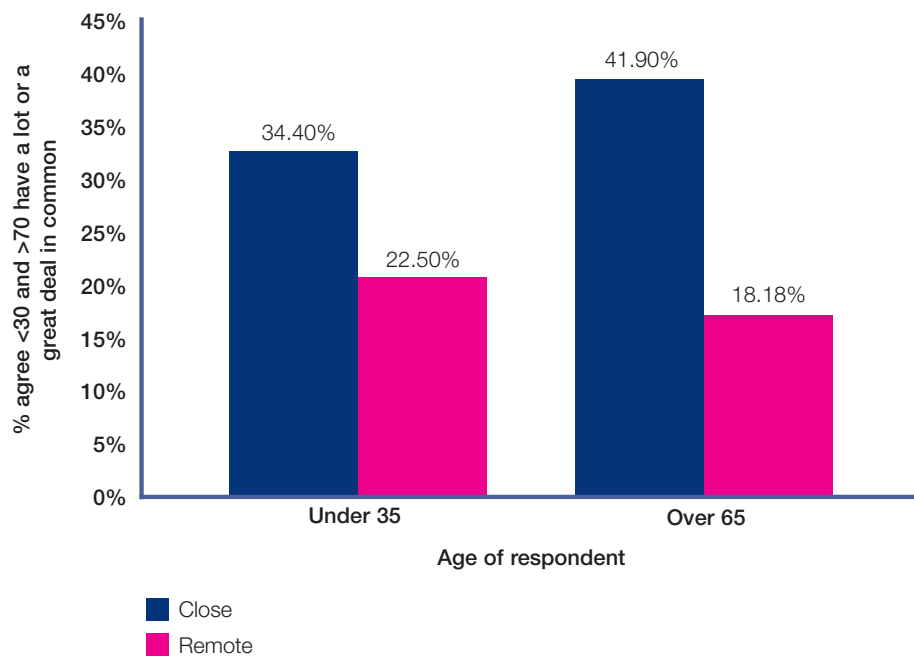
<sup>1</sup> Pettigrew, T F, (1998), 'Intergroup contact theory', Annual Review of Psychology, 47, 65-85

## How much do older and younger people have in common?



## Does degree of intergenerational contact make a difference?

Effect of contact and age on perceived commonality between generations



## 6. Ageism: more prevalent than other forms of discrimination?

Everybody gets old. Consequently there is always the potential for age-related prejudice. What we don't know is how significant ageism is for people compared with the other, perhaps more obvious, forms of prejudice. In fact we found that people reported being the target of ageism more than any other form of prejudice – be it based on gender, disability, sexuality, ethnicity or religion.

As many as 29% said they had been treated unfairly because of their age, compared with 24% who cited gender, the next most prevalent form.

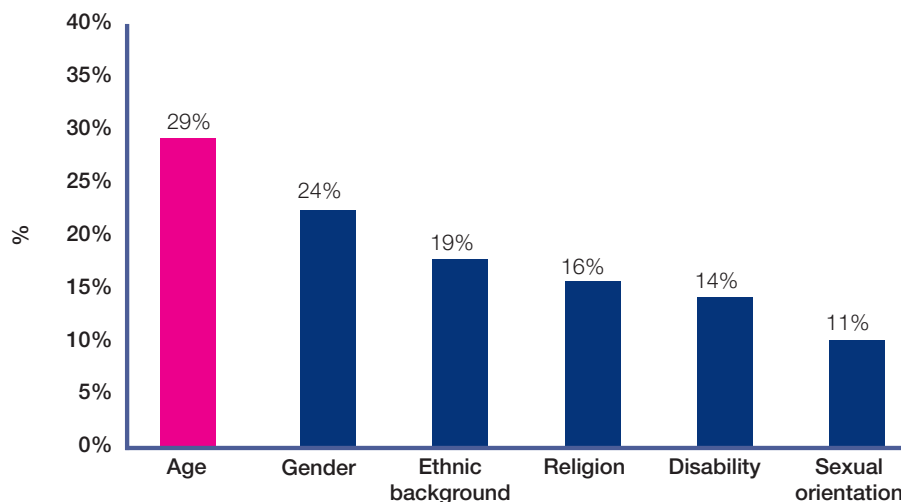
Looking at the picture more closely, it is clear that ageism is targeted unevenly at various age ranges. Reported experiences of any form of discrimination decline gradually as people become older. But for ageism it is a much more rocky ride.

It's high in the younger ages, dipping in mid life and slightly rising again till retirement age, after which experiences of ageism tail off considerably.

In comparison to other forms of prejudice, however, ageism remains high throughout the lifecourse and from the age of 55 onwards, people were nearly twice as likely to have experienced age-related prejudice as any other form.

### How prevalent is Ageism?

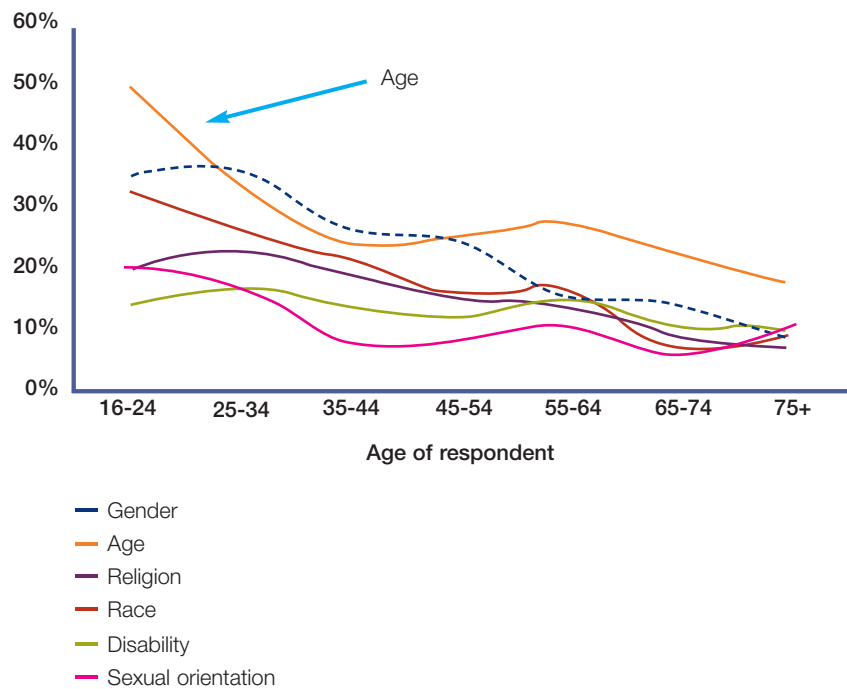
% reporting experience of prejudice or unfair treatment in the past year





## Does ageism affect everyone?

Experience of prejudice or discrimination in relation to age



## 7. Ageism: affecting those who are already discriminated against

There are approximately 20 million older people in the UK, 11 million over state pension age. It could be argued that experience of ageism is bound to be more prevalent, given the population at risk. If that was the case, we would expect the experience of ageism to be reported as less frequent or significant among minority groups. However, the findings show that everybody is a potential victim of ageism and that ageism further compounds inequalities felt by other groups.

There were marked differences when the research compared people of different ethnic backgrounds. Whereas people with white and mixed ethnic backgrounds reported age as the most frequent basis of prejudice, those from Asian and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds were much more likely to identify ethnicity or race as the most common basis of prejudice against them.

Worryingly these groups were also much more likely than Whites to have experienced age related discrimination.

Women are more likely to suffer gender prejudice than men, and they report slightly less age-related prejudice. However, women are still as likely to suffer ageism as they are to suffer sexism.

We also investigated the relationship between having a disability and experiencing prejudice. For both non-disabled people and for those with disabilities, ageism was the most frequently reported prejudice.

## 8. Ageism: the practical consequences

Asked how serious age discrimination is in this country, 43% of people thought it was fairly or very serious. This is backed up by real life experiences of discriminatory rules and practices.

The prejudicial way older people are treated is exacerbated by media images. Half of those surveyed thought that those responsible for advertising and sales literature took no notice of older people.

And when marketers do use older people in campaigns it tends to pander to societal stereotypes. Take the provocative PaddyPower advertisement (see page 3). Or the warm but slightly eccentric character of J.R.Hartley (Yellow Pages). Or the traditional generational values (Werthers Originals).

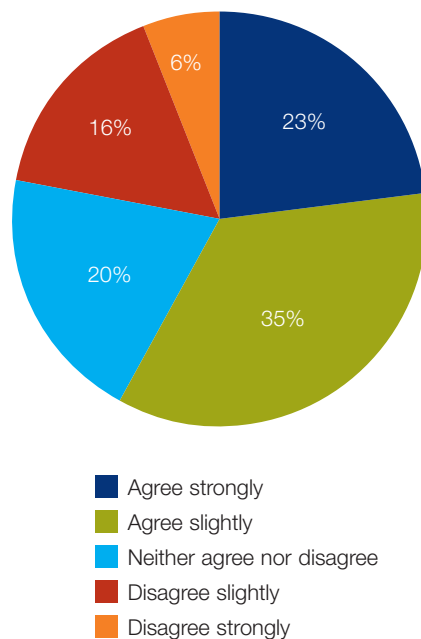
Just as they did with the “pink pound”, when marketers awoke to the considerable spending power of the gay market, some executives are now realising the value of the “grey pound”.

Some companies and their advertisers are making a deliberate effort to change this approach such as Dove, Norwich Union and Prudential. Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty used a 95 year-old model, Irene and Merlin, 45 who had grey hair, to work against the grain of traditional cosmetic imagery. When they used “real women” in an earlier 2003 campaign, sales rose 9% in the year to £120m while sales of its firming lotion rose 700%.<sup>1</sup>

Norwich Union are using their “Ready for Tomorrow” advertising campaign which shows ageing as an accepted process rather than one that appears to be taboo. But advertisers, marketers and media commentators still have a long way to go. 58% of people believe the media portray older people in a negative way.

### Media portrayal

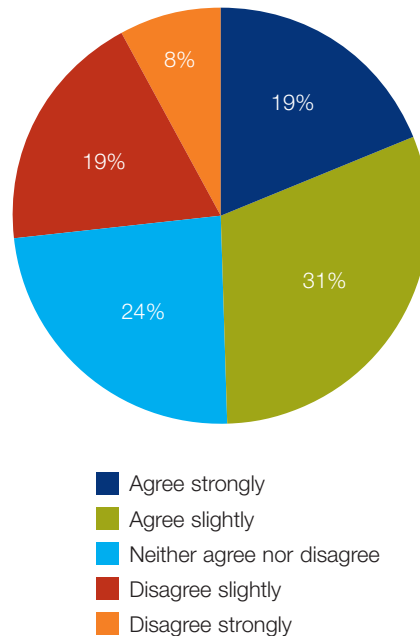
Agreement with the statement ‘The media (newspapers, TV) portray older people in a negative way more often than not.’



<sup>1</sup> Reference: The Daily Telegraph 19th January 2005

### Marketing people take no notice of older people

Agreement with the statement 'Marketing people (adverts, sales and literature) take no notice of older people.'



### Taking action

Age Concern has warmly welcomed the Equality Bill and the establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR). We believe that the Commission will help build a fairer society as will the two reviews of equality – looking at the causes of persistent discrimination and how anti-discrimination legislation can be modernised. At the moment older people have no legal protection against ageism or a statutory body they can turn to if discriminated against. We believe the CEHR can play a huge role in changing attitudes and behaviour. We support the integration of different equality strands under one Commission because older people are not just defined by their age but by their gender, race, belief, sexuality, disability and may suffer disadvantage for a number of different reasons. Unlike some other forms of discrimination, age discrimination has the potential to affect us all. But it is often complex and subtle.

## What can the CEHR do?

The Commission has a crucial role to play in order to overcome ageism and the threats posed by it. For the first time there will be a public body with responsibility to ensure that ageism is dealt with. It will be able to make a difference in a number of practical ways. Age Concern would like the CEHR to focus on the following:

### 1. Ensuring that public bodies promote age equality

At present proposals for the Commission mean a duty on public bodies to promote gender, disability and race equality. No such duty exists for age. Our research shows ageism is more prevalent than other forms of discrimination. A duty to promote age equality would make a huge difference to the lives of older people.

### 2. Review of discrimination of goods and services

One in three people who mention age discrimination in the marketplace talk about insurance products. The Government through the Equality Bill and the CEHR should introduce protection against ageism in the provision of goods and services. The Commission should play a leading role in working with the Government's equality reviews to monitor, gather evidence and develop recommendations.

### 3. Enforcing human rights legislation

There should be a new definition of public authority under the Human Rights Act to protect more vulnerable older people. At present older people in independent care homes are not protected by the act. We believe the Commission should have full enforcement powers.

### 4. Involving real people

The Commission should not just consult the experts and its established partners about its work but should be compelled to involve people in order to make the most of transforming society. In particular it should ensure it involves hard-to-reach, excluded or vulnerable people, and those in work or seeking work in their 50s and 60s who do not come into contact with services targeted at parents or pensioners.

### 5. Recognising the scale of the problem

There is a continuing need to measure the scale and nature of ageism to reflect the changing age structure of society, and to understand how and where ageism is most likely to impact on people's lives and opportunities. For too long ageism has not been recognised and our survey shows how prevalent it is. We support the Commission because although older people should not just be defined by their age it should not be ignored in favour of other forms of discrimination.

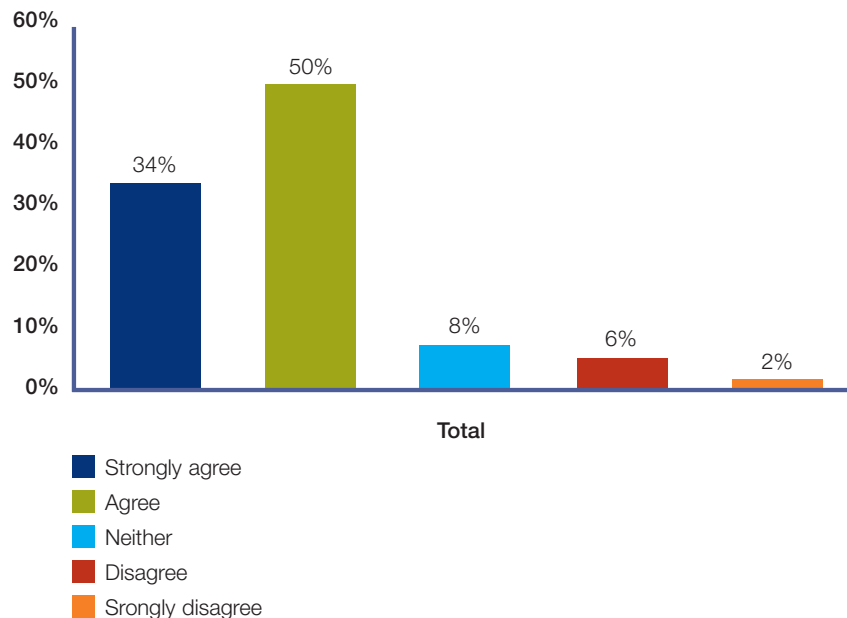
## Conclusion

Equality in Britain is a highly prized commodity. One in three strongly believe there should be equality for all groups.

We believe that the Commission will help to build a fair society where equality of opportunity, respect for human rights and social integration are a reality for all. But it is imperative that the Commission realises that ageism is a pervasive and measurable process affecting young and old in different forms and different contexts. Ageism is not a simple hostile stereotype: it is about relative judgements and is often difficult to pin down.

Age related differences will always exist, but we need to work to challenge damaging stereotypes – such as older people’s supposed “incompetence”. And we need to work to increase positive relationships between the generations as a way of overcoming this.

### Agreement with the statement: “There should be equality for all groups in Britain?”



**A comprehensive report on the findings of the Ageism Survey is being prepared.**

If you are interested in receiving a copy, please register your interest with [Donna.Pearce@ace.org.uk](mailto:Donna.Pearce@ace.org.uk) or phone 0208 765 7429



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